



Practices of Looking

An Introduction
to Visual Culture

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**Consumer Culture and
the Manufacturing of Desire**

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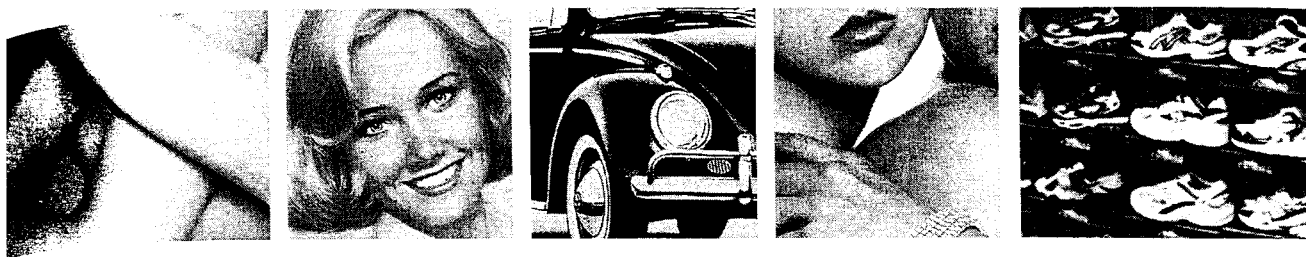
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Consumer Culture and 6 the Manufacturing of Desire

Images are not free. Visual images play a primary role in the commerce of contemporary societies. For instance, works of art are considered to have financial worth and fuel the commerce of the art market, and news images are bought and sold because of their value in depicting current and historical events. Images also have a primary role in the functioning of commerce through advertisements. This means that images are a central aspect of *commodity* culture and of consumer societies dependent upon the constant production and consumption of goods in order to function. Such advertising images are central to the construction of cultural ideas about lifestyle, self-image, self-improvement, and glamour. Advertising often presents an image of things to be desired, people to be envied, and life as it “should be.” As such, it necessarily presents social values and ideologies about what the “good life” is. It is also a central strategy of advertising to invite viewers/consumers to imagine themselves within the world of the advertisement. This is a world that works by *abstraction*, a potential place or state of being situated not in the present but in an imagined future with the promise to the consumer of things “you” will have, a lifestyle you can take part in. Indeed, advertising often speaks the language of the future. In the IBM ad on the next page, for instance, a young child reaches out toward the orbiting earth, signifying both innocence and a sense of possibility. The child reaches out to a world that communications technologies (through companies like IBM) will put within his reach. The ad projects its meaning into the future, working to equate this sense of a new world of global communications with the logo of the company itself.

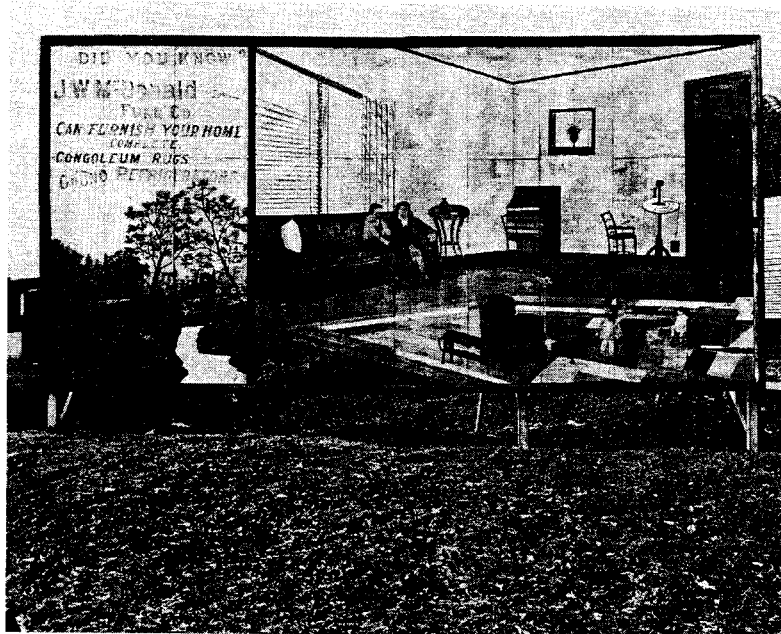


We are confronted with advertising images constantly through the course of our daily lives, in newspaper and magazines, on television, in movie theaters, on billboards, on public transportation, on clothing, on the World Wide Web, and in many other contexts in which we may not even notice them. Ads speak to us in a broad range of voices and through an array of *strategies*. In some companies, advertisements are produced by in-house design groups. However, most companies work with advertising agencies whose business it is to design a visual identity for corporations, products, and services. In today's complex media environment, the people who produce advertisements are compelled to constantly reinvent the ways in which they address and hold the attention of increasingly jaded consumers, who are always on the verge of turning the page or hitting the remote control. As we discussed in Chapter 2, as viewers we have a range of *tactics* with which to interpret and respond to the images of advertising, to negotiate meaning through them, or to ignore them. As one strategy to deal with the potentially resistant viewer, contemporary advertising often presents itself as an art that no longer speaks to the viewer directly as a consumer, but takes on many different voices and modes of address. In the world of advertising, images can be presented as art, science, documentary evidence, or personal memories. Our understanding of

advertising images is thus influenced by our experience of images in many different social roles and in diverse modes of presentation.

Consumer society

Advertising is a central component of consumer societies and *capitalism*. Capitalism is an economic system in which investment in and ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange of goods and wealth are held primarily by individuals and corporations. Advertising is one of the primary means through which this exchange of goods is promoted, whether on product packaging or in print, television, radio, or the Internet. Historically, consumer cultures are a rather recent development. Consumer societies emerged in the context of modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with the rise of mass production, in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and with the consolidation of populations in major urban centers. A consumer society is one in which the individual is confronted with and surrounded by an enormous assortment of goods, and in which the characteristics of those goods change constantly. There would be no reason for advertisers to constantly create new ads about products if those products always remained the same and were sold through the same strategies. In a consumer society there are great social and physical distances between the manufacture of goods and their purchase and use. This means that workers in an automobile factory may live far from where the cars they help build are bought and sold, and may never be able to afford to buy one. Increased industrialization and bureaucratization in the late nineteenth century meant a decrease in the number of small entrepreneurs and an increase in large manufacturers; this in turn resulted in people traveling longer distances to work. This is in contrast to feudal and rural societies of the past, for instance, where despite trade and traveling salesmen, there was generally proximity between producers and consumers, such as a shoemaker who would make a product that was sold and used in the small village where he made it. As places filled with mobile crowds, mass transit and city streets became forums for advertising. In the middle twentieth century, with the increased distances traveled by people in automobiles in the city and countryside, billboards became a central venue for advertising. The photograph on the next page, taken in 1936 by Walker Evans, shows a rural billboard in Alabama. In this ad, the passing drivers are asked to imagine themselves within the living room depicted on the billboard.



Walker Evans, *Billboard*,
Birmingham, Alabama,
1936

In a consumer society, there is a constant demand for new products and the need to constantly repackage and sell old products with new slogans and ad campaigns. In *Marxist theory*, this is understood as the way that capitalism is dependent upon the overproduction of goods and the need for workers to be consumers and spend large sums on mass-produced goods. A capitalist society produces more goods than are necessary for it to function, hence the need to consume goods is an important part of its *ideology*. In a consumer society a large segment of the population must have discretionary income and leisure time, which means that they must be able to afford goods that are not absolutely necessary to daily life but which they may want for an array of reasons, such as style or status. Consumer societies are thus integral to aspects of *modernity*, such as industrialization and urbanism, that we discussed in Chapter 4. The mass production and marketing of goods depended until the late twentieth century on large sectors of the population living in concentrated areas, so that the distribution, purchase, and advertising of goods had an available audience. This has changed with the rise of e-commerce and telemarketing in the 1990s, phenomena that have made telephone and on-line virtual shopping a real possibility, eliminating the necessity for the overhead costs of a physical retail space (a store, a mall) for the sale of goods to consumers. E-commerce is a new phenomenon, but it also recalls the nineteenth and early twentieth-century practice wherein those

people living in rural areas relied on mail-order catalogs to purchase many of their goods.

In the emergence of the consumer society of the late nineteenth century, the workplace, the home, and commerce became increasingly separated, which in turn had a significant effect on the structure of the family and gender relations. As people moved increasingly into urban centers and away from agrarian lifestyles in which all members of the family play crucial roles in production, the distance between the public sphere of work and commerce and the private sphere of the home increased. Women were relegated to the domestic sphere while men were delegated to the public sphere. In this context, women and men were increasingly perceived by manufacturers and advertisers as two distinct kinds of consumers, who could be targeted through different kinds of strategies linked to different sets of goods.

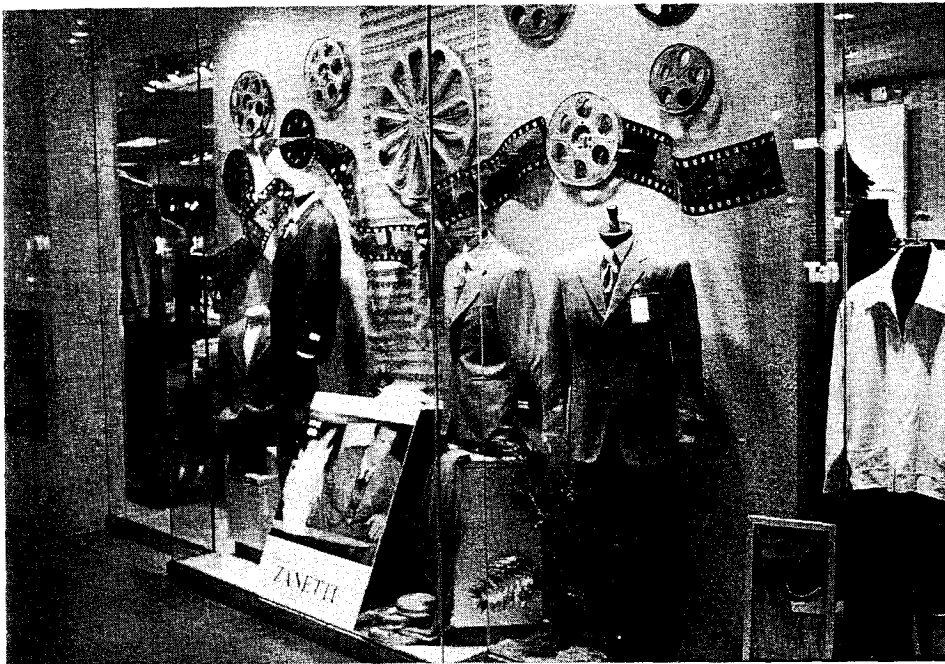
Fundamental changes in the experience of community in the rise of the consumer society came through an increased complexity and diversity of the urban population, increased immigration, and a loosening of the hold of small and stable communities and families on social values. The new experience of urban life and modernity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has often been characterized as the sensation of standing in a crowd, being surrounded on a daily basis by strangers who one will never know, and the both giddy and overwhelming feeling of the city as a kind of organism. In this modern context we can see another important aspect of consumer societies: the source of concepts of the self and identity are constituted in a larger realm than the family. In the modern city, many people were subject for the first time to many influences beyond those of their families. It has been argued that people derived their sense of their place in the world and their self-image at least in part through their purchase and use of commodities which seemed to give meaning to their lives in the absence of the meaning derived from closer-knit community. Indeed, some theorists have gone so far as to say that advertising replaced what had previously been the social fabric of communities, becoming, in effect, a central source of cultural values. This is why, perhaps, people jokingly refer to shopping as a form of "retail therapy."

One aspect of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modern consumer society was the rise of the department store as a site of commerce. The department store announced itself as a site of both commerce and leisure, and was constructed in order to display the largest possible number of goods



to a consumer who was imagined as strolling through its aisles. The big windows of department stores were set up as forms of spectacle, that extended the store onto the street. The photograph, of a Parisian shop window in 1925, taken by French photographer Eugène Atget who photographed the streets of Paris in the early twentieth century, shows the conventions of merchandise display during this period. These conventions of using mannequins to display clothing, and creating scenarios for the window shopper, have changed little over time. Stores were designed with an emphasis on the visual display of goods, to make movement through them exciting and to create the idea of shopping as a leisure activity. Window shopping or browsing thus gained a kind of currency (interestingly, an activity that is recalled in the activity of browsing on the World Wide Web). Department stores were important to several new forms of commerce, including buying on credit, the idea that it is patriotic to both consume and acquire debt, and the escalation of consumption to promote rapid turnover of goods. They were also central to the general encouragement by manufacturers of planned obsolescence, the deliberate shoddy manufacture of goods in order to necessitate their replacement with new ones every few years.

Eugène Atget. *Magasin, avenue des Gobelins*. Store Window, avenue des Gobelins, 1925



Window shopping is, in many ways, a modern activity, one that is integral to the modern city that is meant for pedestrians, strolling, and crowds. As film scholar Anne Friedberg has written, the visual culture of window shopping in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was related to the more

mobile vision of modernity.² Evidence of this can be seen in the nineteenth-century interest in panoramas, large 360-degree paintings that the spectator viewed while turning in the center, dioramas, or theatrical compositions of objects and images moved before immobile viewers, and the emergence of photography in the early nineteenth century and motion picture film at its end. French poet Charles Baudelaire wrote about nineteenth-century urban landscapes as the visual terrain for the *flâneur*, a man who strolled the streets as an observer, never quite engaging with his surroundings but taking an interest in them. Walter Benjamin, whose work we discussed in Chapter 4, also wrote about the *flâneur* and the complex shopping arcades of nineteenth-century Paris, elaborate enclosed spaces that were the predecessors of today's shopping malls. Friedberg introduces the concept of the *flâneuse*. In the nineteenth century, *flâneurs* were mostly men, because respectable women were not allowed to stroll alone in the modern streets. As window shopping became an important activity, in particular with the rise of the department store, this allowed for the *flâneuse*, as a window shopper, to emerge in more contemporary contexts. Friedberg notes that theories of film spectatorship, which we discussed in Chapter 3, can also help us to understand the broader function of spatial, mobile practices of looking in the consumer culture of the city. There are many kinds of gazes at play in the visual culture of modernity, from cinematic predecessors such as the panorama to the cinematic gaze, to the gazes at work in the urban environment of pedestrians, commerce, and window display. In modern society, new ways of consuming were linked to new ways of looking. These were not limited to shopping but extended into all areas of urban life.

One of the fundamental changes in turn-of-the-century Euro-American societies that was integral to the rise of consumer culture was the emergence of what historian T. J. Jackson Lears calls the "therapeutic ethos." These societies shifted over a period of time from valorizing a Protestant work ethic, civic responsibility, and self-denial to legitimating ideas of leisure, spending, and individual fulfillment. An older concern for saving gave way to a new emphasis on spending and on imagining that the path to betterment was through the increased acquisition of goods. In this changing culture, the feeling that life was often troubling and overwhelming prevailed. As a result, the idea that everyone was potentially inadequate and in need of improvement took hold. This resulted in a rise of commodities that were intended to aid

in self-improvement. This therapeutic discourse is an essential element of consumer culture. Modern advertisements were able increasingly to speak to problems of anxiety and identity crisis, and to offer harmony, vitality, and the prospect of self-realization, all recently shared values in the emerging modern culture. Today, consumption continues to be thought of as both a form of leisure and pleasure and as a form of therapy. It is commonly understood that commodities fulfill emotional needs. The paradox is that those needs are never truly fulfilled as the forces of the market lure us into wanting different and more commodities—the newest, the latest, and the best. This is a fundamental aspect of contemporary consumer culture—that it gives us pleasure and reassurance while tapping into our anxieties and insecurities.

In contemporary consumer cultures, modern industrial capitalism has evolved into what is now referred to as late, or postindustrial, capitalism. Corporations are multinational, goods move globally, and consumers purchase goods that have been manufactured across the world. This means that the physical and social distances between the production and the distribution and consumption of most goods have grown even larger. For instance, much of the clothing that is sold in North America and Europe is manufactured by underpaid workers in Taiwan, Indonesia, and India. Computers are constructed from parts made in Taiwan, Mexico, and Silicon Valley, all very different and distant places. Late capitalism is also based more on the exchange of new forms of commodities such as services and information rather than material goods. In this contemporary context, commerce is increasingly global and advertising is also produced for global markets. However, there are many issues of cultural difference that limit the capacity of ads to be understood in different cultures. As we noted in Chapter 1, US magazines rejected a famous ad from the global Italian-based Benetton company of a black woman nursing a white infant because of the cultural connotations of the ad. In the US context, the ad signified the enslavement of black women as wet nurses in slavery. The specificity of this response suggests that the global marketplace of late capitalism has not necessarily produced a global advertising audience. The targeting of advertisements geared to specific demographics organized according to region, age, culture, gender, and class is very much the case, even for global brands like Coca-Cola. In Chapter 9, we will examine more closely the spread and limitations of global visual culture.

Commodity culture and commodity fetishism

A consumer culture is a commodity culture—that is, a culture in which commodities are central to cultural meaning. Commodities are things that are bought and sold in a social system of exchange. The concept of commodity culture is intricately allied with the idea that we construct our identities, at least in part, through the consumer products that inhabit our lives. This is what media scholar Stuart Ewen has termed the *commodity self*, the idea that our selves, indeed our *subjectivities*, are mediated and constructed in part through our consumption and use of commodities. Clothing, music, cosmetic products, and cars, among other things, are commodities which people use to present their identities to those around them. Advertising encourages consumers to think of commodities as central means through which to convey their personalities. For instance, for many years Dewar's Scotch Whisky had a well-known campaign, the "Dewar's Profile," in which various well-accomplished individuals are profiled according to their profession, interests, hobbies, favorite book, and, of course, their favorite drink. The campaign suggests that if one wants to acquire the qualities of creativity and achievement of these individuals, one should drink Dewar's. It speaks to the concept of a commodity self, making the assertion that this commodity will become a part of one's self-identity and how one projects that self into the world.

This raises the very important question of what precisely it is that ads sell. It is commonly believed that the function of advertisements is to sell products; the consumer sees an ad and is persuaded by it to purchase the product. However, many cultural theorists have argued that advertising is not nearly as successful in this intent as its critics and proponents would like us to believe, and that advertising functions in a much more indirect way to sell lifestyle and identification with brand names and corporate logos. Communication theorist Michael Schudson has argued that the ability of advertising to sell specific products is much overrated.³ Advertisers are more often than not guessing rather than accurately assessing consumer desires and attitudes. In addition, Schudson states that advertising is only one part of a broader commercial environment, that includes direct marketing, different product placement and display, and complex distribution networks. Advertising is simply the most obvious element of these aspects of marketing.

Advertisers have viewed advertising as an art form since the 1960s, when

the field underwent a creative revolution. Ads became more entertaining and intriguing as the rigid hard-sell conventions of the 1950s were relaxed. As cultural theorist Thomas Frank has argued, advertising began in the 1960s to appropriate the language of the counterculture, and to aim to attach to products the signification of being hip. This trend has only increased since that time, and today many products are sold through associations with youth culture and the idea of being cool.

It remains the case, however, that advertising is central to the way in which commodities are given particular qualities and values that they do not have innately. Analyses of commodities and how they function come to us primarily through Marxist theory. Marxist theory is both a general analysis of the role of economics in human history and an analysis of the ways that capitalism functions. A Marxist critique of capitalism understands advertising to be a means to create demand for products, which makes people buy more than they really need. Marxist theory has analyzed in particular the relationship between *exchange value* and *use value* in capitalism. Exchange value refers to what a particular product costs in a given system of exchange. Use value refers to its use within that society. Marxist theory critiques the emphasis in capitalism on exchange over use value, in which things are valued not for what they really do but for what they're worth in abstract, monetary terms.

We will use perfume ads to illustrate exchange value and use value. One might argue that certain food products have a relatively equal exchange and use value. Rice, for instance, is a useful food staple which is relatively affordable, hence its use value is equal to, if not greater than, its exchange value, which is relatively cheap. Expensive perfume, however, is quite another story. A perfume that costs \$40 per ounce has a very high exchange value, yet does it have use value? Can a society function well without perfume? Certainly it cannot without food. One could argue, for instance, that a relatively inexpensive Honda car has the same use value as a very expensive Mercedes-Benz, although their exchange value is dramatically different. Yet, that exchange value carries with it a broad array of social meanings that each owner acquires with these cars. The idea of use value is tricky, since the concepts of what is and is not useful are highly ideological—one could argue endlessly about whether or not certain so-called leisure goods are “useful.” In an elite culture, ownership of a Mercedes-Benz might buy one a certain social status and respect that another car would

not. But it is difficult to assess the use value of qualities like pleasure and status.

One of the most important concepts in the Marxist analysis of advertising is the idea of *commodity fetishism*. This refers to the process by which mass-produced goods are emptied of the meaning of their production (the context in which they were produced and the labor that created them) and then filled with new meanings in ways that both mystify the product and turn it into a fetish object. For instance, a designer shirt does not contain within it the meaning of the context in which it is produced. The consumer is given no information about who sewed it, the factory where the material was produced, or the culture in which it was made. Rather, the product is affixed with logos and linked to advertising images that imbue it with cultural meanings quite apart from those of its specific production conditions and context. Products are most often marketed far from where they were produced. Handmade objects, such as objects made by particular craftspeople, more often retain *signifiers* of their production. Commodity fetishism can be seen as an inevitable outcome of mass production and distribution of goods to many different consumers. It demands, however, that labor and working conditions are made invisible to the consumer. This erasure of the labor process devalues the experience of work, and makes it harder for workers to take pride in what they have produced. Commodity fetishism can thus be seen as a system of mystification that empties objects of the meaning of their production and then fills them with commodity status.

It is often easy to understand commodity fetishism by looking at moments when it fails. For instance, in the early 1990s Nike shoes for women were promoted as signifiers of self-empowerment, athletic women, feminism, and hip social politics. Public outcry later in the decade about the dire working conditions in Nike's factories led to an ironic revelation. These symbols of female empowerment were produced by low-paid women who labored under terrible conditions in Indonesian factories. As these conditions were exposed, the process of commodity fetishism was momentarily ruptured. The shoes could no longer be stripped of the meaning of their conditions of production and "filled" with the signifiers of feminism. The company had to respond to this criticism and change some of its practices.

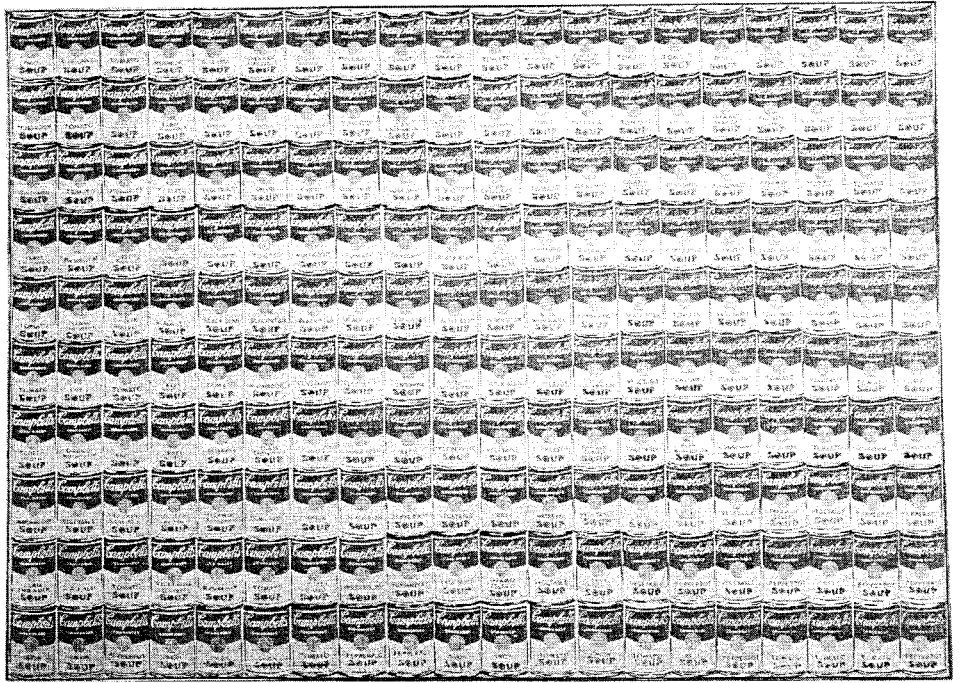
As the primary means of commodity fetishism, advertising functions to attach certain meanings to products that they would not necessarily have in themselves. In the process, it often awards them complex and emotional

attributes: in other words, it can give them an *aura*, to use a term that we discussed in Chapter 4. Commodity fetishism operates through *reification*, a process by which abstract ideas are assumed to be real and concrete. In advertising this means that objects (commodities) acquire human qualities (are perceived as sexy, romantic, or cool, for instance), and human relations can become increasingly objectified and devoid of emotional meaning. This is most obvious in products that are so clearly initially devoid of meaning, such as perfume. We could ask, what is perfume but scented water? Yet, various perfumes are awarded heightened meanings that consumers then supposedly acquire when wearing them. A perfume like Chanel No. 5 carries *connotations* of wealth, class status, and tradition, whereas Calvin Klein's CK signifies not only hipness but androgynous sexual status. Ads for these products attach these specific qualities to them which consumers are then encouraged to feel that they can subsequently acquire through purchasing and using the product.

Condemnations of consumer society and commodity culture have proliferated throughout the twentieth century. The *Frankfurt School* theorists, who were discussed in Chapter 5, saw the role of commodities as a kind of death knell for meaningful social interaction. For these theorists, commodities were "hollowed out" objects which propagated a loss of identity and eroded our sense of history. For them, to think, for instance, that a specific consumer item might make one's life meaningful was to engage in a corruption of the really valuable aspects of existence. In the 1960s, the Frankfurt School ideas re-emerged in a political and social context in which commercialism was condemned as one of the symptoms of a society gone wrong. During this time, the newly emergent counterculture eschewed notions of material success and commodity culture. Yet, at the same time, in the art world, *Pop Art* in the late 1950s and 1960s engaged with mass culture in a way that did not condemn it. As such, Pop was an attack on distinctions between *high and low culture*. Pop art took what was considered to be low culture, such as television, the mass media, and popular culture like comic books, and declared it to be as socially significant as high art, in the realm of fine art, classical music, and other artistic products that are elitist and upper-class by association.

By incorporating television images, advertisements, and commercial products into their work, the artists who produced Pop Art were responding in a very different manner from the Frankfurt School to the pervasiveness of

Andy Warhol, *Two Hundred Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962



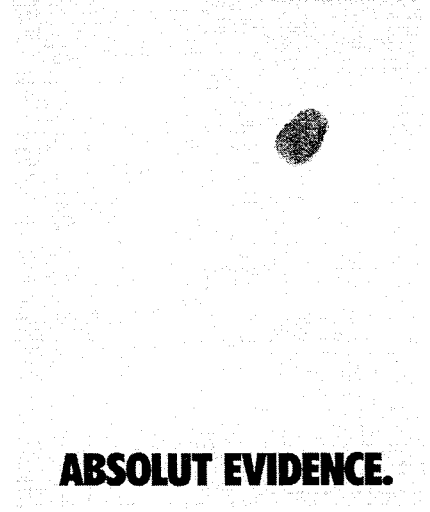
Roy Lichtenstein, *Drowning Girl*, 1963



commodity culture. They were doing so not by condemning mass culture but by using it, demonstrating their love of and pleasure in popular culture. Andy Warhol painted and printed images of Campbell's soup cans to question the boundaries between art and product design, and celebrate the aesthetic repetition of mass culture. Warhol's painting has a flattening effect which seems to comment on the banality of popular culture and mass production. The multiplicity of the soup cans refers to the inundation and overproduction of goods in a commodity culture, where repetition prevails. Yet at the same time it is an affectionate homage to package design and consumer culture. Other artists turned to "low culture" forms like comic strips and television. In search of a means to paint an "ugly" picture, Roy Lichtenstein made comic strip paintings, which commented not only on the flat surface of the comic form but also the stories that they told. Lichtenstein's highly formal works were smooth and pristine, in contrast to the painterly brushstroke style of *Abstract Expressionist* painting. In their detail of the dotted surface of the screen-printed comics, these works are a tribute to this commercial form. Lichtenstein's work is a kind of large, oversized comic, blowing up the grain of the comic image so that the viewer can see its dot textures. In this image of a "drowning girl," the artist ambiguously plays off of the conventions and clichés of the self-sacrificing romantic heroine.

Addressing the consumer

Like other images, advertising images *interpelate* their viewers in particular ways, hailing them as ideological subjects. As explained in Chapter 2, interpellation is the process by which we come to recognize ourselves in the *subject position* offered in a particular representation or product. In her discussion of advertising, cultural critic Judith Williamson calls this *appellation*. Ads speak to us through particular modes of address, and ask us to see ourselves within them. Often this is done with written text that specifically speaks to the viewer as "you." In recontextualizing an historical image, a photograph of President Kennedy aboard Air Force One, the ad on the next page works to establish an image of the communication technologies of the past, present, and future. At the same time, it speaks to the viewers as those who believe they should be plugged in constantly, who embrace the world of new technology. Many ads speak in emphatic tones to viewers/consumers, as if the voice of the ad knows what "you" need and want.



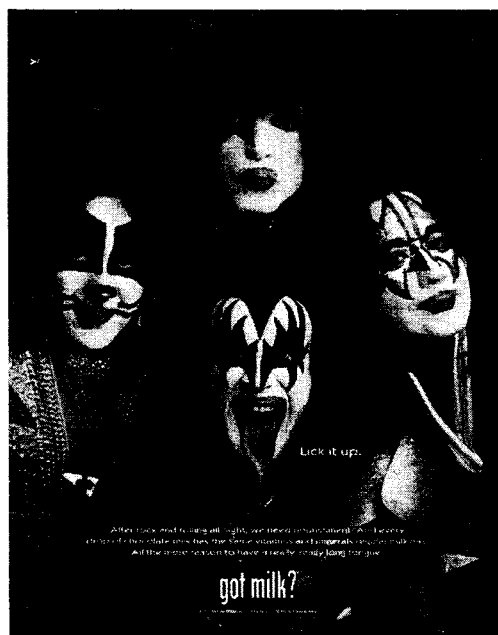
commodity signs—we aim to acquire, through purchasing a product, the meaning with which it is encoded.

Advertising uses particular codes and conventions to convey messages quickly and succinctly to viewers. While some ads intend to shock us or capture our attention through their difference, most advertising provides information through the short-hand language of visual and textual conventions. Hence, most ads speak a mixture of familiarity and newness. One of advertisers' primary strategies is to turn a product into a recognizable brand. A brand is a product name that we know about whether or not we own or ever intend to purchase the product. For instance, Absolut vodka is advertised by a campaign that uses the shape of its bottle as an ongoing motif, often in very playful ways. In these ads, the Absolut bottle refers to nineteenth-century author Mary Shelley, who wrote the novel *Frankenstein*, Las Vegas as a site of conventions (where people have to wear name tags), and to the use of fingerprints as evidence (of whoever stole the vodka bottle). Absolut is established as a brand name because its advertising campaign is well-known, highly visible, and consistent enough over a long period of time as to be instantly recognizable. Even people who have never purchased or tasted Absolut vodka know its brand name. In addition, Absolut has turned its ad campaign into a work of art, not only commissioning famous artists (Andy Warhol, Kenny Scharf, Keith Haring, and Ed Ruscha, among others) to do ads, but also publishing a book specifically about the campaign. In order for a product to be turned into a brand an advertisement must add value to it. The product must

acquire particular attributes, indicate a kind of lifestyle, and produce an image of its potential consumer. In the case of Absolut, it gains the added value of being sophisticated and arty through its well-known campaign.

This strategy of repeating a motif in an advertising campaign can be used not only to establish familiarity with a product for viewers, but also to keep viewers' attention by varying the elements within a motif. For instance, the "Got Milk?" campaign, which advertises not a brand but the general product milk, uses images of celebrities, such as the rock band Kiss, all wearing a white "milk mustache" to promote the consumption of milk. The campaign thus aims to give milk the glamour attributes of these famous people, to convince adults that milk is not simply a drink for children, and to attach a kind of hipness to what is thought of as a stodgy product. It affirms this by repeating this form and slogan from ad to ad.

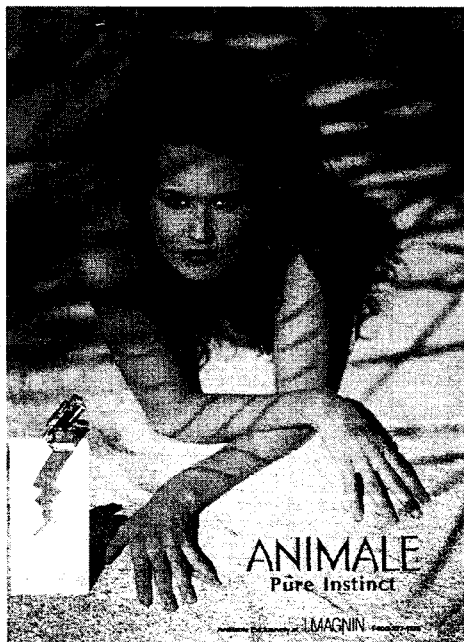
It is a convention in advertising that ads speak in important terms about products that may in the long run have very little importance. Ads operate with a *presumption of relevance* that allows them to make inflated statements about the necessity of their products—the idea, for instance, that the status of one's hair is a key factor in changing one's life or that wearing a new perfume will miraculously produce a handsome man at one's side. In the real world, these statements would be absurd, but in the world of advertising they make perfect sense. In the world of the ad, these claims have relevance. This is in



part because ads create and speak in a world of fantasy. The world presented by an advertisement is fictional. We know, for instance, that the image of a car being driven through a complex set of obstacles in the desert, a common strategy of sports car advertising, is one of artifice.

The presumption of relevance of contemporary advertising also extends to the various elements that are connected in an ad. Ads create a relationship of *equivalence* between elements within the frame and between the product and its signifier. In this perfume ad, an equivalence is created between a woman and an animal. Borrowing on notions of the exotic, the ad attributes the qualities of mystery and sensuality associated with cats to the figure of the woman. The woman gazes directly at the viewer/consumer in a pose that is meant to be both enticing and predatory.

Equivalence can also mean that an advertisement establishes direct connections for the viewer/consumer between the product and a figure of some kind. For instance, a contemporary Gap campaign uses vintage photographs of artistic figures such as Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, Jack Kerouac, Sammy Davis Jr., Gene Kelly, and Marilyn Monroe wearing khaki pants. Each ad contains the slogan, "Picasso wore khakis" or "Sammy wore khakis," which forms the first part of a sentence that implies ". . . and so should you." The very average khakis thus become signifiers of creativity, uniqueness, and potential fame. The campaign is clearly geared toward middle-aged



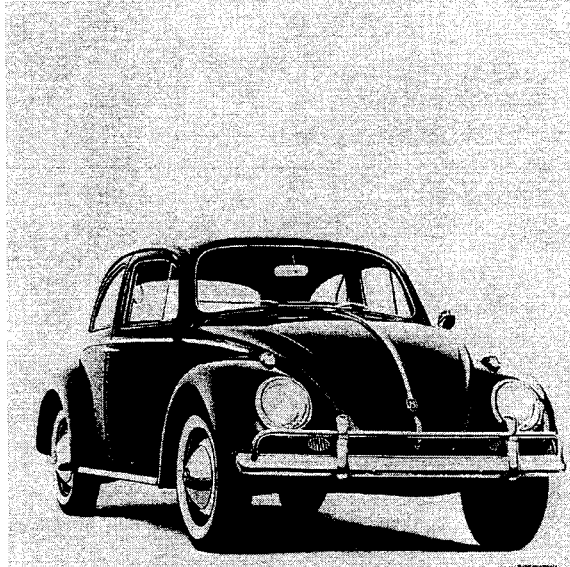
consumers in its use of artistic figures of the past. It works to make khaki pants simultaneously signify both tradition and creative talent.

In the same way that ads construct relationships of equivalence between various objects, figures, and qualities, they also indicate relationships of difference and opposition from other products. Companies *differentiate* products from their competition. While this often happens by implication, it has become increasingly common since the 1970s for advertisements to name their competition and to position themselves in opposition to it. Hence, 7-Up produced a successful campaign by calling itself the “Uncola” and Avis car rentals became a well-known brand by selling themselves as the No. 2 competitor behind Hertz, with the now legendary slogan “We Try Harder.” Coke and Pepsi have spent decades differentiating their products from each other either directly or indirectly in their campaigns. Why is differentiation an important strategy of ads? Precisely because many products actually are quite similar. Certainly, one could argue that Coca-Cola and Pepsi have spent millions differentiating their products in ads precisely because there is in actuality little difference between their kinds of cola. The difference between them is ultimately taste—not flavor, but the class and cultural aesthetics associated with the respective colas in their ad campaigns.

Images and text

Through these processes of equivalence, differentiation, and signification, ads are doing the work of creating commodity signs. It is important to the meaning of most advertisements that they use photographs to construct their messages. In that photographs always carry with them the connotation of *photographic truth* yet are also a primary source of fantasy, they provide important dual meanings in many advertisements. As we discussed in Chapter 1, photographs derive their power from evoking both evidence of the real and a magical quality that can prompt emotion in the viewer. They are, in Charles Peirce’s terms, *indexical*, and thus carry the meaning of offering a trace of the real. It is through complex compositions of photographs, text, and graphics that ads speak to consumers.

Text can often have a powerful effect in establishing the meaning of an advertisement, and changing the meaning of the photograph or image presented. This is particularly effective in ads that intend to shock or in public service advertisements that aim to jar the viewer/consumer. Part of a now famous



Lemon.

This Volkswagen missed the boat. The chrome strip on the glove compartment is scratched and must be replaced. Changes one year wouldn't have noticed it, inspector Kurt Krower did.

There are 2,337 men at our Wolfsburg factory with only one job: to inspect Volkswagens at each stage of production. 1,000 Volkswagens are produced daily; there are nine inspectors

than cars!

Every shock absorber is tapped (up to chesting height); every wheel is checked. VW's have been rejected for surface scratches barely visible to the eye.

Final inspection is really something! VW inspectors run each car off the line onto the Tübingenstraße test bed (road), take up 189 check points, gun ahead to the electronic

broke stand, and say "No!" to one VW out of fifty.

This preoccupation with detail means the VW looks longer and - equals less maintenance, by one bridge, than other cars. It also means a used VW is a better deal than any other car!

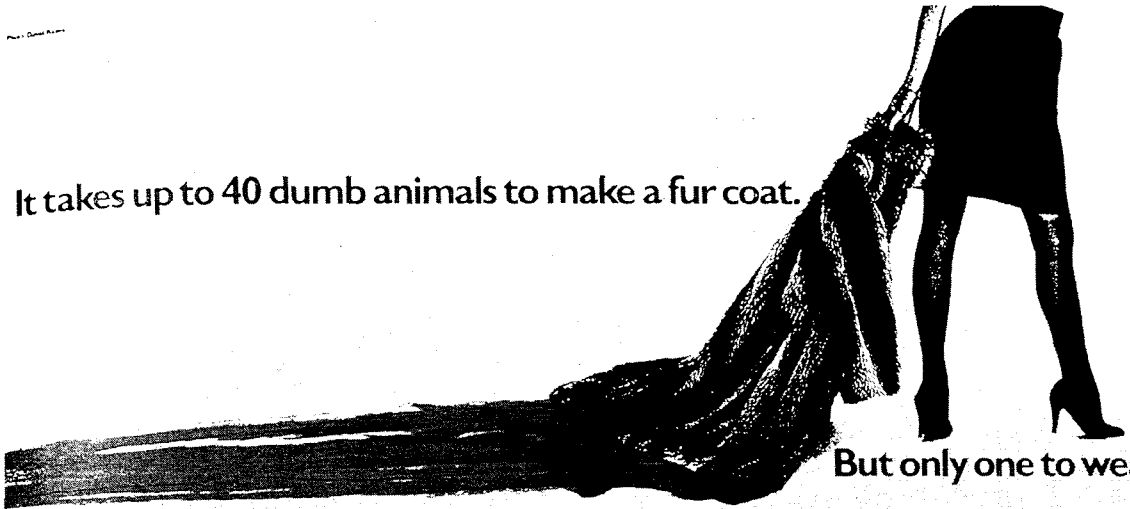
Yes, pick the lemons; you get the plums.



Volkswagen campaign from the 1960s, this ad captures the viewer's attention through its use of text. The ad was shocking in its time precisely because it did what an ad was not supposed to do—it insulted the product being sold. The smaller ad copy explains that this particular car was a lemon and hence would never be sold. The use of text here is thus crucial in creating a contradiction that the viewer is invited to figure out by reading further. The Volkswagen campaign is well known in advertising history because it broke the rules of advertising conventions in its time. It was spare, humorous, and irreverent in a way that spoke to consumers in a new form of address, as informed consumers.

Many public service ads use text to enhance dramatic impact. These ads deploy the conventions of advertising, and are usually placed in the commercial venues of advertising such as magazines and billboards and public transportation, in order to create meaning through juxtaposition with other ads. Thus, an image that could advertise fur becomes, with the text, an anti-fur poster. Or, an image that first signifies cookware, which then evokes violence with the bold type, turns out, when the interested viewer reads further, to be about eating habits. The effect of these anti-ads is to play off the conventions of advertising's mix of text and image, in which advertising copy usually guides

It takes up to 40 dumb animals to make a fur coat.



But only one to wear it.

LYNX

Fighting the fur trade

If you don't want animals gassed, electrocuted, trapped or strangled, don't buy a fur coat. P.O. Box 509 Dunmow, Essex Tel: 0371 2018

While few people have ever been hit over the head with a frying pan, many have been hit in the heart, the prostate gland, and the colon.

Because fried foods, as part of a high-fat diet, may increase the risk of heart disease as well as certain cancers —

including breast cancer.

For a free booklet on how to help reduce your risk through low-fat eating, call 1-800-EAT-LEAN.

After all, the purpose of food is to sustain life, not take it away.

1-800-EAT-LEAN

**EVERY YEAR
THOUSANDS OF
PEOPLE ARE
KILLED WITH A
FRYING PAN.**

Ad Council

A public service message from The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

the viewer on how to read the meaning of the image. In these ads, it is precisely the way that text forces the reader to look again and re-read the image with new meaning that creates the impact of the ad.

These kind of juxtapositions work in part through the power that is awarded to photographs not only in advertising but in our culture in general. In Peirce's terms, which we discussed in Chapter 4, ads combine *iconic signs* in the form of drawings or graphs, *indexical signs*, such as photographs, and *symbolic signs* in the form of text. Contemporary advertising, with its complex combinations of words, photographs, drawing, sound, and television images deploys all three kinds of signs to construct selling messages. The relationship of text and photographs in advertisements is the combination of symbolic and indexical signs. This is also important in ads that emphasize the indexical quality of photographs by contrasting them with iconic images. As an indexical sign, a photograph carries the cultural weight of depicting the real and relaying a sense of authenticity.

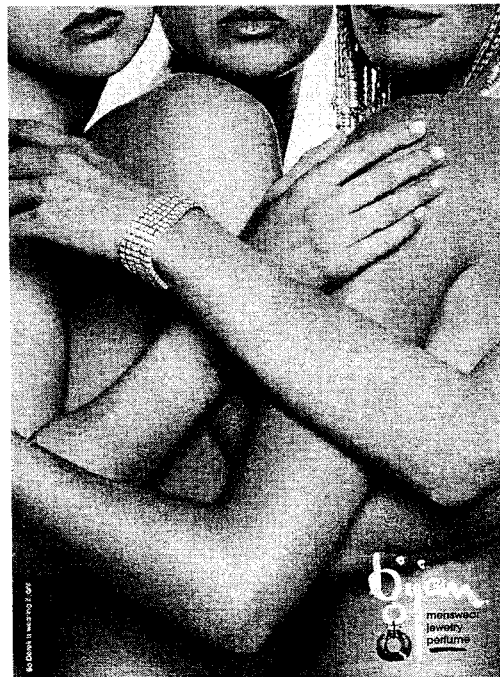
Envy, desire, and glamour

All advertisements speak the language of transformation. They tell consumers that their products will change their lives



for the better if they buy a particular product. As we noted earlier, this relates to the therapeutic ideology that ads participate in when they promise to improve our lives. In speaking to viewers/consumers about changing themselves, they are always interpellating consumers as in some way dissatisfied—with their lifestyles, appearances, jobs, relationships, etc. Many ads imply that their product can alleviate this state of dissatisfaction. They often do this by presenting figures of glamour that consumers can envy and wish to emulate, people who are presented as already transformed, and bodies that appear perfect and yet somehow attainable. John Berger has written, “The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour.”¹ The idea of glamour is central to advertising, both in the use of well-known celebrities to sell products and in the depiction of models who appear to be happy, without flaws, and satisfied.

The world created by advertisements can also appear to be precious, artistic, and valuable. The attachment of the value of art, in particular fine art, to a product gives it a connotation of prestige, tradition, and authenticity. Many contemporary advertisements make reference to art works of the past in order to give their products the connotation of wealth, upscale leisure, and cultural value attributed to works of art. Some ads reference art by presenting artistic poses and styles, such as the “art becomes you” ad that we discussed in Chapter 4. Other ads speak to consumers who are familiar with the





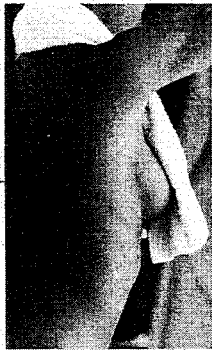
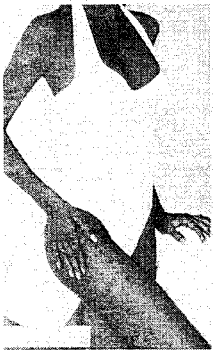
codes of classical painting, by both referencing art and playing off those conventions to the knowing consumer. In still other ads, direct references to specific paintings and painting styles distinguish a product. In placing the jeans in a painting in the style of *Impressionist* painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir, who worked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this ad differentiates these jeans from other jeans and awards them the meaning of tradition. Art is used to present a world that is both enviable and nostalgic and to flatter the consumer for his/her *connoisseurship*.

The enviable world of advertising is thus presented to viewers/consumers as a fantasy of what their lives could be, and it entices consumers to believe that this life is attainable through the act of consumption. Ads thus entreat us to construct commodity selves and to work to acquire the attributes attached to certain products through their use. Sometimes this means that ads speak to consumers as if their bodies exist in separate parts. Since the 1970s, ads have increasingly represented women's bodies in fetishized parts—legs, lips, breasts, etc. Detached from the rest of the bodies and the people of whom they are a part, these body parts represent ideals to consumers. Even when they declare that perfection is unattainable, these ads ask consumers to believe that it can be attained through hard work, maintenance, and consumption. The bodies that are represented in these advertisements have been

Dillard's



No Body is Perfect.



We all aspire to that perfect body. A body that's firm and fit. Smooth and silky. CLARINS knows what it takes... Get closer to the perfection you desire with CLARINS botanical-based Firming Body Treatments. They effectively complement the benefits of good nutrition and regular exercise to visibly improve skin's firm, toned appearance. We invite you to see the results for yourself.

The skin-silkening benefits of Exfoliating Body Wash provide immediate botanical body results. Perfect as spurs of polishing, grants quick, natural-looking skin tone. Eliminating water impurities and reducing uneven skin texture. Botanically-sourced, gentle, deep cleanser. Formulated with soothing plant extracts to help soothe, hydrating and improve to keep skin calm, reconditioned for even the most sensitive skin.



Body Ascending Oil™ Formulated in 100% natural to promote skin's firm appearance. Fights off premature aging and soothes the skin. Specialized plant oils to tighten and tone. Zero in on problem legs and thighs with the ultimate body beauty slinger in Cellulite's targeted care. With 15 gentle, botanical-sourced ingredients, it's a multi-actioned, minimizing the appearance of cellulite.



Get started now. Consult with CLARINS Skin Care Specialist and receive a complimentary sampling of CLARINS Firming Body Treatments.



rendered to perfection through the sophisticated imaging techniques of air-brushing, color enhancement, and digital manipulation. These images retain the power of the photograph as an indexical sign—the idea that they represent real people—while they are actually highly constructed images which bear little or no relationship to the codes of documentary realism. This is, of

course, part of the paradox of what these ads sell—an unattainable highly constructed world which is held out as an attainable ideal.

The world of advertising speaks the language of self-management, self-control, and conformity. These are *docile bodies*, to borrow a term from Michel Foucault—bodies that are socially trained, regulated, and managed by cultural norms. Consumers are incited by ads to seek individuality by conforming to particular standards of beauty, to control their body's odors, movements, food intake, desires, and urges. We are addressed by ads as if we can choose our bodies and reshape them into new forms and sizes.

Advertising thus actively speaks to consumers about their identities, and appears to offer solutions to perceived problems of self-image. As such, it projects anxiety upon consumers. Behind the message of self-improvement is, of course, the message that you should be anxious about what you do not have yet and who you should be. The consumer appalled by advertising is thus not only dissatisfied but also worried. Ads that use anxiety to sell products work by suggesting to consumers the ways in which they may be not only inadequate but potentially endangered or weakened without a particular product. Advertising about technology and financial services often deploy this strategy.

IBM

I'LL NEED TO SEE SOME I.D.

AS/400e=Web Security

Multiplatform security is built right into the AS/400e server.

Wear resistance. Use the AS/400e server and data everywhere for a better

of e-business security that's hard to breach. And even harder to crack.

See for yourself. The password is: www.ibm.com/secure

Attend a free small business seminar on using technology to win in the marketplace

Inc.

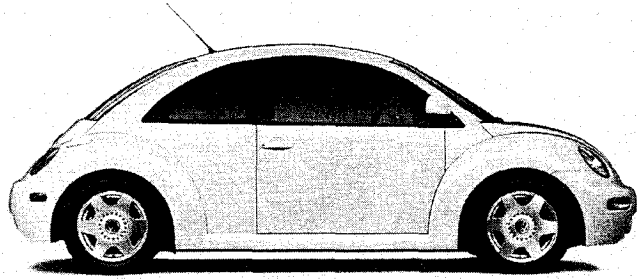
How can technology help you find new customers and increase sales?

In Apple and IBM AS/400e, you can find a solution that provides you with the information you need to grow your business.

This ad places the consumer in the uncomfortable position of confronting a policeman. The direct address of the ad, through both text and image, thus constructs the viewer as a potential suspect, a startling image that is intended to grab our attention through the anxiety it produces.

It is an essential element of advertising that it promises to us an abstract world which we will never experience. When John Berger wrote that advertising is always situated in the future, he was referring to the way in which the present is depicted in advertising as lacking in some way. Here, it is helpful for us to return to the *psychoanalytic theory* of Jacques Lacan. He suggests that desire and lack are central motivating forces in our lives. Our lives are structured by a sense of *lack* from the moment that we recognize that we are separate entities from our mothers. This separation, experienced as a splitting, marks the point from which we recognize ourselves as subjects apart from others. We are always searching to return to some state of wholeness that we believe we once had prior to this moment of recognition. We constantly strive, through relationships and activities like consuming products, to fill that lack. It is our drive to fill our sense of lack that allows advertising to speak to our desires so compellingly. Advertisements often recreate for us fantasies of perfect ego-ideals, facilitating a regression to this childhood phase.

Yet, it is an essential aspect of lack that it is necessarily always unfulfilled. There is never a moment, in psychoanalytic terms, when lack is replaced by satisfaction, precisely because of its origins in various stages of infantile and childhood development that we keep replaying and the fact that lack is primarily nostalgic. Nostalgia is a longing for a prior state, often perceived to be innocent, which will always remain unfulfilled because this state is irretrievable—indeed, it never existed. Advertising is adept at speaking to consumers in nostalgic terms. This can take the form of evoking earlier times, when life seemed less complicated, or it can be a reference to a time period when, for instance, the potential consumer was younger. In today's advertising, this often takes the form of marketing products to consumers of the post-World War II baby boomer generation by reviving the symbols of their youth, such as the signifiers of the 1960s. In the late 1990s, Volkswagen's campaign for the new Beetle, shown on the next page, evoked the nostalgia for the original Beetle and what it represented about lifestyles and attitudes in the 1960s. The spare and "clean" style of the image, with the car situated in a white space, also evokes the earlier Volkswagen ad campaign.



**If you were really good in a past life,
you come back as something better.**

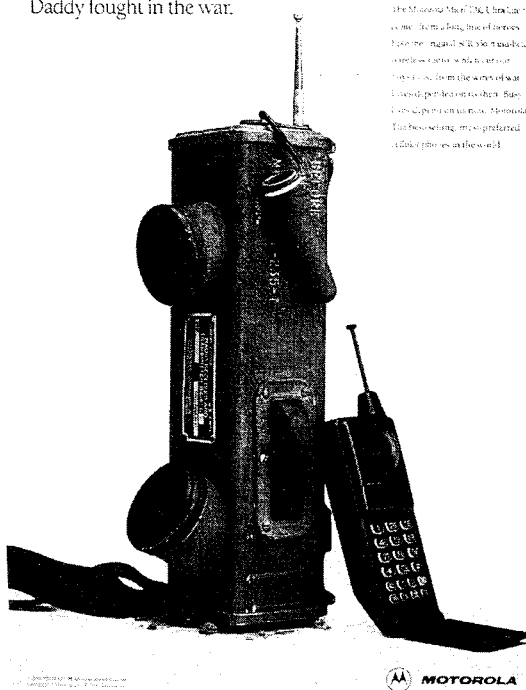
Many ads reach back into the past to attach concepts of memory and history to their products. In creating equivalence between products and symbols of the past, these ads are packaging memory into easily understood signs. Often, these ads aim to evoke not only nostalgia in viewers/consumers, but also a sense of lineage and tradition. Tradition is sold in these ads as something that will authenticate the product and give it the value of reliability, the test of time, and the approval of our forefathers. In this Motorola ad, the cell phone is not being sold through the predictable signifieds of speed, convenience, and competitive pricing. It is being sold as the child of the wireless radio of World War II, a device described as a war “hero” which saved lives. Encoded in the cell phone is thus a sense of tradition as well as heroism, dependability, and life-saving importance.

Belonging and difference

Advertisements sell both concepts of belonging (to a community, nation, family, or special group or class of people) and difference (from others). Sometimes when advertisements ask us to consume commodity signs, they attach to their products concepts of the nation, family, community, and democracy. Hence, the ideological function of many adver-

Daddy fought in the war.

The Motorola StarTAC™ Uniden™
is the most reliable line of business
to use the rugged StarTAC™ mobile
phone as your primary means of
communication from the front of war.
It's the perfect choice for the
business professional who's always
on the go. Motorola's StarTAC™
is the best way to stay connected
in today's global world.

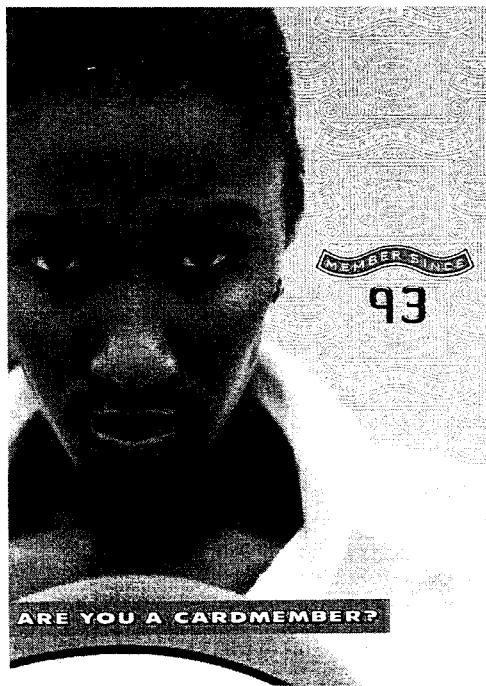


tisements takes the form of speaking a language of patriotism and nationalism, in order to equate the act of purchasing a product with a practice of citizenship. In other words, ads that use an image of America or Britain or other nations to market products are selling the concept that in order to be a good citizen and to properly participate in the nation, one must be an active consumer. These products are presented as the means by which we can participate in national ideology.

Because the idea of the nuclear family is central to most national ideologies, it often emerges as a focus of advertisements. The concept of “family values” is a central aspect of political debates, and many advertisements depict the family as nuclear, concerned, and, above all, consumerist. In many ads, the family is a site of harmony, warmth, and security, an idealized unit with no problems that cannot be solved by commodities. Indeed, commodities are presented as the means by which the family is held together, affirmed, and strengthened. In these ads, people relate to each other on the most intimate levels through commodities, which are shown as facilitating familial emotion and communication. For instance, the well-known AT&T slogan “reach out and touch someone” promotes the telephone (and AT&T service) as a means to create emotional attachment.

Advertising about the nuclear family exemplifies the Marxist critique of reification, the process by which products are awarded human qualities and human relations are mediated through commodities. McDonald's can be successful in selling a fast-food meal as the proper replacement for a home-cooked family meal. In many McDonald's ads, the restaurant is presented as the place where family togetherness is reaffirmed because going to McDonald's is something the family members agree on and which they can share. In therapeutic terms, McDonald's makes up for what the family cannot do (find time to have both a meal and a meaningful experience together at home). McDonald's achieves this message, and the presumption of relevance within it (in order for viewers to not ask the question, why is an evening out at a fast-food restaurant the perfect family meal?), in part because it has established itself as a patriotic symbol through years of advertising.

Ads that sell concepts of the nation and the family as norms speak to viewers as if they are members of these social realms. Membership in an exclusive club is often a selling point that allows consumers to feel that they can aspire to such exclusivity while feeling anxious about whether or not they really do belong there. In this ad, American Express establishes its product as not simply a credit card but a club in which one is a member (and to which famous people—in this ad, basketball player Lisa Leslie—who are unidentified



in the ad, belong). The ad poses its question in a way that can promote anxiety. The concept of membership is underscored by the fact that images of the celebrities are actually embedded within the design of the card itself. In addition, many advertisements establish particular codes for class difference and represent class relations. Ads for high-end, expensive products establish the class to which they belong through understood conventions such as classical music, references to fine art, and other codes of wealth and prestige. These ads interpellate all consumers as potential members of a class regardless of their actual class status.

In the same way that advertising sells the idea of belonging, it also establishes codes of difference in order to distinguish products. Ads often establish norms by demonstrating things that are different from the norm through marking. As we discussed in Chapter 3, the *unmarked* category is the unquestioned norm and the *marked* category is the one seen as different or *other*. For instance, a white model is unmarked, the normative category, precisely because consumers are not meant to register the fact of his/her whiteness, whereas a nonwhite model is marked by race. Traditionally, race has been used in advertising to give a product a kind of “exoticism” and foreignness.

For example, there has been a long tradition of advertisements that use images of the “islands” and unidentified exotic locales to sell things such as cosmetic products and lingerie. These unidentified locales are coded as closer to nature and offering access to the “primitive.” These ads situate the tropics as the source of beauty aids precisely because they are represented as more natural, less tainted by modernity, and as the source of innocence and beauty. They work both to erase colonial politics and the reality of life in the Third World (where, in fact, most of the low-paid labor that produces First World products takes place) and to re-code these places as sites of leisure and playlands for tourists. Here again, we can see how commodity fetishism operates as a process of mystification, obscuring the complex reality of colonized places and former colonies in order to attach the meanings of difference to products. Ironically, while these products promise to white consumers the qualities of *otherness*, commodity culture is about the denial of difference, in that it encourages conformist behavior through the act of consumption.

Increasingly, markers of ethnicity and race are used in advertisements to demonstrate social or racial awareness and to give a product an element of

cultural sophistication. There are an increasing number of ads that use models of many different ethnicities in an attempt to both unmark race and to attach to their products the meaning of social awareness. The most obvious example of this is the advertising of United Colors of Benetton. Benetton ads are intended to signify racial harmony and ethnic diversity. While they have produced a famous advertising campaign using documentary images, which we will discuss in Chapter 7, in their advertisements that display clothing the company always uses models of many different races posed together. In these advertisements, cultural difference sells.

Hence, Benetton's ads both unmark race and mark it quite consciously. Viewers are meant to register the many races represented by the models and to read this diversity as progressive and hip. This campaign can be said to reduce the concept of racial identity to one simply of skin color as something fashionable, an association that simplifies the complexity of cultural and ethnic identity. In other words, racial difference is an integral part of one's identity and culture, it is not simply a color that one takes on and off. Through its association with the product of Benetton clothing, the idea of racial harmony is reduced to the idea of putting on and taking off different colored clothing.

Benetton is selling a celebration and erasure of difference and a kind of universal humanism. At the same time, the company is promoting multiculturalism as something that one can buy. The concept of multiculturalism in some cases has been tied to commodity culture, as if one might buy one's way into another culture. Many people see themselves as participating in multiculturalism simply by purchasing products from other cultures and eating in "ethnic" restaurants. Consuming otherness is central to commodity culture in the global era.

Bricolage and counter-bricolage

The idea of a commodity self, and consumer feelings of belonging and difference in response to advertisements, demonstrate the ways that consumers negotiate meaning through ad images and commodity culture. As we discussed in Chapter 2, there are a range of strategies that viewers/consumers use when reading images, and in the case of advertisements they can run from responding positively to an ad's message to resisting its claims. As a form of dominant culture, advertising is also subject

to *counter-hegemonic* forces. In Chapter 7, we will discuss some of the ways that advertising has responded with *postmodern* strategies to the increased sophistication of viewers/consumers. Here, we would like to note the ways that counter-ads have been constructed and how the commodities sold by advertisements are often used by consumers in unintended ways.

Although the products advertisements sell to us often give us pleasure and satisfaction, they can never entirely achieve the promises of fulfillment that advertisements offer. Yet, all consumers have the potential to reconfigure the meanings of the commodities that they purchase and own. As we noted in Chapter 2, many youth *subcultures* use commodities as central elements of their style—low-slung pants over boxer shorts, jackets worn backwards, Tommy Hilfiger sweat shirts, or big work boots. The redeployment of commodities for new purposes and meaning—the wearing of a safety pin as body decoration, for instance—is a practice called *bricolage*. *Bricolage* is a mode of adaptation where things are put to uses for which they were not intended and in ways that dislocate them from their normal or expected context. What happens to a cultural object or commodity when it has been dislocated—how do we read it as a *sign*? These subcultural signs reappropriate objects to make new signs, producing new meanings that can then in turn change the meaning of a commodity.

Yet, the dynamic process of cultural practices and power relations is such that the activities of marginal subcultures are often quickly coded as “cool” and identified by mainstream marketers and advertisers as potential new fashions and trends. As we noted earlier, since the 1960s, advertising has borrowed many of the cultural signifiers of hipness in order to attach these meanings to products. This means that many ads do the work of creating commodity signs of youthfulness. The selling of youth is not simply about selling the idea that a product will make one feel or look more youthful, it is about selling the posture of youth to older consumers. Many slogans for ads, such as Pepsi’s “Be Young. Drink Pepsi,” thus do the work of filling a product with the meaning of youth.

At the same time, contemporary marketers are constantly in search of products, styles, and commodities that are understood to be cool on the street, which will then appeal to a broad range of middle-class consumers who want to acquire products with the signification of cool. Fashion designers and advertisers use a form of *counter-bricolage* to appropriate styles which have reconfigured commodities. They repackage the youth styles that use *bricolage*

to change the meaning of commodities, and resell those ideas to mainstream consumers. For instance, the youth style of wearing boxer shorts visibly above one's pants has produced a fashion trend for designer boxer shorts. Contemporary advertising thus often uses codes of the street, urban hipness, and subculture fashion to repackage products and sell them to consumers as authentic.

Many contemporary advertising campaigns aim to attach abstract concepts not specifically to products, but to corporate logos. In attempting to speak in new ways to consumers, advertisers thus increasingly produce ads that neither look like traditional ads nor address the consumer as traditional ads do. We will discuss strategies of postmodern advertising at more length in Chapter 7. Here, we would like to note the ways that corporations attempt to acquire new voices as strategies of counter-bricolage. For example, Apple Computer's "Think Different" campaign used important figures of the twentieth century such as Mahatma Gandhi, Amelia Earhart, Mohammed Ali, and others, as a means of establishing its corporate logo as original and unique, as globally significant and forward thinking. The fact that a historical figure such as Gandhi led a lifestyle that was antithetical to technology is



unimportant to the commodity sign of the ad. In other cases, even the logo may be difficult to decipher in an anti-ad. First viewers/consumers must search for what the ad is selling. The ad gets the viewer's attention by initially withholding information rather than providing it.

Just as advertisers have taken on the codes of youth culture, many have also used the language of feminism to produce images of control and body management. Feminist concepts of empowerment and strength are translated into the mandate that working out and producing a tight, lean, muscled female body is equivalent to having control over one's life. As a kind of "commodity feminism," according to Robert Goldman, these ads sell concepts of feminism by attaching them to products such as running shoes.

These ads draw on the language of self-control, empowerment, and self-realization that underlies mainstream feminism in order to speak to female consumers who identify with those values. In some ads, this takes the form of celebrating women's liberation through their capacity to be active consumers, in others it means joking about the past of women's oppression, as a means of establishing the present as liberated. In still other ads, this means establishing the values of fashion comfort and practicality as specifically feminist. Many contemporary ads speak to female consumers as though particular



**YOU WERE BORN
A DAUGHTER.
YOU LOOKED UP TO
YOUR MOTHER.
YOU LOOKED UP TO
YOUR FATHER.**



**YOU LOOKED UP AT
EVERYONE.
YOU WANTED TO BE
A PRINCESS.
YOU THOUGHT YOU
WERE A PRINCESS.**

**YOU WANTED TO OWN A HORSE.
YOU WANTED TO BE A HORSE.
YOU WANTED YOUR BROTHER TO BE A HORSE.
YOU WANTED TO WEAR PINK.
YOU NEVER WANTED TO WEAR PINK.**



Air Max 95

**YOU WANTED TO BE A VETERINARIAN.
YOU WANTED TO BE PRESIDENT.
YOU WANTED TO BE THE PRESIDENT'S VETERINARIAN.
YOU WERE PICKED LAST FOR THE TEAM.
YOU WERE THE BEST ONE ON THE TEAM.
YOU REFUSED TO BE ON THE TEAM.**



**YOU WANTED TO BE GOOD IN ALGEBRA.
YOU HID DURING ALGEBRA.
YOU WANTED THE BOYS TO NOTICE YOU.
YOU WERE AFRAID THE BOYS WOULD NOTICE YOU.
YOU STARTED TO GET ACNE.
YOU STARTED TO GET BREASTS.
YOU STARTED TO GET ACNE THAT WAS BIGGER
THAN YOUR BREASTS.
YOU WOULDN'T WEAR A BRA.
YOU COULDN'T WAIT TO WEAR A BRA.
YOU COULDN'T FIT INTO A BRA.**



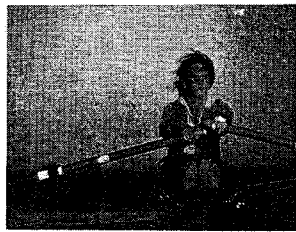
Air Max 95

**YOU DIDN'T LIKE THE WAY YOU LOOKED.
YOU DIDN'T LIKE THE WAY YOUR PARENTS LOOKED.
YOU DIDN'T WANT TO GROW UP.**



Air Max 95

**YOU HAD YOUR FIRST BEST FRIEND.
YOU HAD YOUR FIRST DATE.
YOU HAD YOUR SECOND BEST FRIEND.
YOU HAD YOUR SECOND FIRST DATE.
YOU SPENT HOURS ON THE TELEPHONE.
YOU GOT KISSED.
YOU GOT TO KISS BACK.
YOU WENT TO THE PROM.**



**YOU DIDN'T GO TO THE PROM.
YOU WENT TO THE PROM WITH THE WRONG PERSON.
YOU SPENT HOURS ON THE TELEPHONE.
YOU FELL IN LOVE.
YOU FELL IN LOVE.
YOU FELL IN LOVE.
YOU LOST YOUR BEST FRIEND.
YOU LOST YOUR OTHER BEST FRIEND.
YOU REALLY FELL IN LOVE.
YOU BECAME A STEADY GIRLFRIEND.
YOU BECAME A SIGNIFICANT OTHER.**



Air Max 95



Some day later you start taking yourself seriously.
You know when you need a break. You know
when you need a rest. You know when to get involved
in school, and when to get out of it.



*And you know it's time to take care
of yourself, to do something that makes
you stronger, more complete.
Because you know a better life is waiting for you,
and you're ready to change it.*

Just do it.

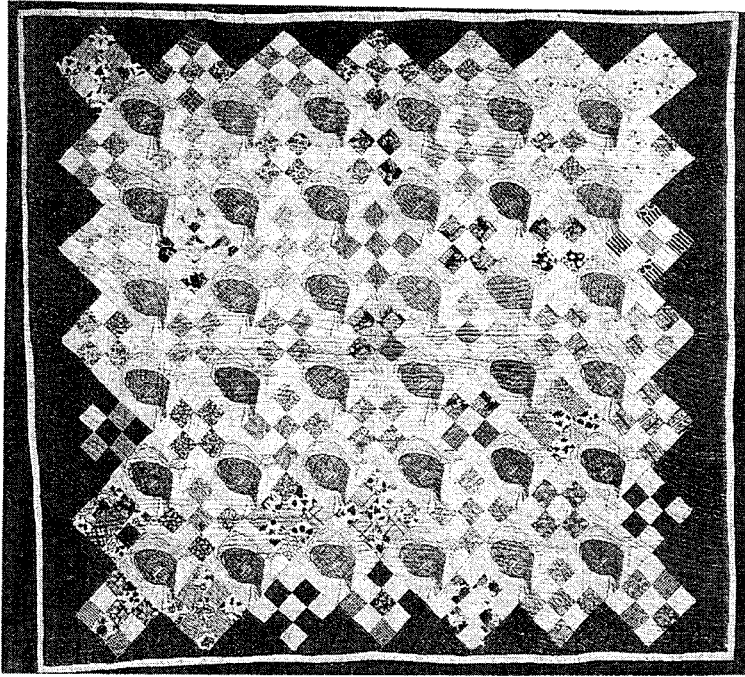
YOU BECAME SIGNIFICANT TO YOURSELF.

products—in particular athletic wear—are coded as feminist, self-empowering, and individualistic. In this Nike ad, a woman's life journey is enacted like a script, one that creates a kind of ad book as it spans many magazine pages, thus asking the viewer to invest time in reading it. Under the guise of feminism, these ads sell an equally normalizing image of the perfect body—one which is taut, tight, and muscled, a body in control and on which one has to work hard. On the one hand, women viewers/consumers might feel good about an ad that speaks to them in the language of feminism and empowerment; on the other hand, it raises the question: what does it mean when complicated ideas such as feminism or social awareness become something that can be attached to a product and sold? When a brand name can thus connote feminism, advertisers have succeeded in reducing important political principles to the simple act of selling.

The brand

The role of the brand is central to commodity culture. The 1934 film *Imitation of Life*, directed by John Stahl, includes a shot of a factory conveyor belt upon which box after box of pancake mix rolls by imprinted with the image of a black domestic worker. The white businesswoman who is the main protagonist of the film will strike it rich with this recipe, which originated with her maid—the very woman whose face becomes synonymous with the product. Like the infamous Aunt Jemima® pancake syrup so popular in the USA, this national brand indicates the link between stereotypes of identity and the marketing of products. Ironically, the woman who became synonymous with the product and its quality reaped few benefits from her image's function as commodity sign. The "Aunt Jemima" image has been reproduced in many places, including the quilt pictured on the next page, made from Aunt Jemima sacks in the 1940s. This is a cultural artifact that, incidentally, preceded Andy Warhol's reproduced commodity images like the soup cans by two decades. This raises the question of who owns images, and what is the relationship between brand names, identity, and ownership?

As we explain in the next chapter, philosopher Jean Baudrillard has suggested that the late nineteenth century saw the emergence of a commodity culture in which the distinction between objects and images eroded. Instead of a "real" world of objects to which advertisements refer, we see the emergence of a culture in which the image itself is what we live through and



Aunt Jemima sack quilt,
Texas, 1940s

consume. Identity is no longer the signifier of a product. Rather, identity is the pure product that we consume, either as information or as image. Advertisements are not the only means through which we experience the images and signs of commodity culture. They are lived through the insignias and logos affixed to the clothes we wear, the products we use, and the food we eat. One manifestation of this function gone awry (from the standpoint of corporations) is the generic use of trademarks. If you were to say that you might “Xerox” pages from this book, you would be using language that takes the global brand name for the generic activity of photocopying. Rosemary Coombe, a professor of law and anthropology, explains that lawyers refer to the way that trademarks become part of public culture as “genericide.”⁴ The owner of the mark loses rights to the product name as it takes on a meaning for the generic type in the market, rather than for the particular brand of the product. Manufacturers of Coke® and Kleenex® are eager to get us to identify their products with quality, but are not eager to have us kill off their product’s difference by using its name for the generic type. To remain profitable, even those brands that go global need to retain their distinguishing features, their identity, in the marketplace. When the mark of a product gains true universality, it is no longer owned by the company and loses its ability to function as a profit-generating commodity.

Coombe discusses the circulation of brand names, trademarks, and logos as means through which identities are constructed in late capitalism not only for goods and corporations, but for people who appropriate those signifiers of products for a style or aspect of themselves or their culture. In the 1990s, the Nike® slash was ubiquitous not only in the USA but in Europe and some Third World cities as well. As a global brand name signifying not just sports but a certain kind of trendy, quality sports style, Nike developed a cachet such that its products—all with the simple curved slash logo—became near-universal signifiers of hip urban youth culture, so much so that there was discussion of its logo being “overexposed.” As we discussed in Chapter 2, Doc Martens® was the trademark shoe of various subcultures of the 1980s and mainstream youth culture of the 1990s. First manufactured by a doctor named Maertens as orthopedic shoes in Germany in 1947, they were licensed in Britain as work shoes in 1960. As a global brand, Doc Martens have become synonymous with youth subcultures of many different stripes. The product has clear visual identifying features that “read” in a fairly universal and clear way—thick soles, trademark top-stitching where the upper meets the sole, a discreet fabric tag with the company name imprinted at the back of the ankle. The shoe came to be understood as a signifier of cultural resistance, a message that took on less of an edge with the popularization of the brand as a mainstream signifier of the casually hip. Hipness, in this case, is linked to identification with the working class. Fashion, in embracing industrial chic, turned up its nose at high culture and championed instead the everyday styles of those working-class people who wear such shoes at their blue-collar jobs.

The combining and framing of product and brand-name signifiers to form a personal image is a crucial aspect of postmodern identity, which we will discuss in Chapter 7. But the process of crafting a commodity-based identity is not always performed consciously or intentionally. Rather, signifiers collect on and around us as we acquire, use, and consume the multitude of products that surround us. Coombe describes a teenager she encounters on Queen Street, a hip street in urban Toronto. Her observation and analysis of the teenager emphasizes the youth’s engagement in the appropriation of logos as a means of constructing identity. But more importantly, Coombe shows us that this accrual of identity is sometimes offhand and occurs by chance through our encounters with the signifiers of everyday life. In the process of relating this story, Coombe also models the way we as viewers engage in acts of public

looking and interpreting that require knowledge about brands and the cultural meanings and discourses that stick to them:

A teenager on a streetcar I board shrugs off a leather jacket adorned with a stitch-on emblem, a cameo of the Colonel (you know the one); this genteel Southern gentleman's face is overlaid with skull and crossbones. Food tampering, I wonder? No, too literal — maybe the treatment of the chickens the company purchases. I ask her if she knows why there is a skull and crossbones over the Kentucky Fried Chicken® logo. Glancing quickly and curiously at the jacket, she says, “it's my boyfriend's, but I think you can buy them.” “Do you know who makes them?” I ask. She looks at me as if I had requested the name of her narcotics source and murmurs something noncommittal.⁵

We quote from Coombe's account at length because it illustrates so well how trademarks and logos circulate as images appropriated as signifiers of identity. It also shows us how wearers employ humor, irony, and critique in their bodily display of product names and images usually associated with storefronts and billboards. The KFC logo's alteration indicates a level of critique or commentary the meaning of which, interestingly, the wearer herself is unsure about. Intentionality is not the name of the game. Coombe, as the one who looks at the walking display of commentary, engages in a dialogue with the teenager that results in new and subtle meanings emerging from this lesson in looking practices. We learn that the defamation of the logo is covert, underground—the bearer of the logo cannot or will not reveal her source. The jacket in itself—and its apparent meanings—are in fact appropriated from someone, and a person of another gender (the boyfriend). The teenager is in effect a billboard for the signifiers her boyfriend constructed to wear on his own body. This anecdote is rich in its demonstration of the many levels at which logos and product signifiers works in their life on the streets, on our bodies, and in our chance visual and verbal exchanges in the public spaces of modernity. There is no clear author of the signifiers borne by this teenager, no definitive meaning to be derived from the jacket's function as it circulates from back to back and from context to context. Logos are thus the quintessential free-floating signifiers of late modernity. Freed from ties to specific media and subject to cross-industry flows facilitated by deregulation and corporate vertical integration, logos turn up everywhere we look. Not only are they on billboards and magazine pages, they are in the most intimate and the most mundane places. We find them on the edges of our bedsheets and sewn into

the seams of our underwear. They are emblazoned on our mousepads and inscribed along the ridges of pencils. The tie-in is a phenomenon of the twentieth century in which movies and television shows became the source for marketing other consumer goods. Featured merchandise became something more than a product for a secondary set of markets as the commodity sign itself preceded and almost always overtook the “original” source of the movie in revenues and popularity. Children of the 1990s woke between Little Mermaid[®] sheets wearing Batman[®] pajamas and rose to eat cereal out of Tarzan[®] plates while drinking Sesame Street[®] juice boxes while watching Teletubbies[®] in Pooh[®] chairs. Corporate conglomerate “authors,” such as Disney/Capital Cities/ABC, have launched a rich intertextual world populated by myriad logos and trademarked characters. Advertising has become not just a way of selling goods but an inescapable mode of everyday communication in the new commodity culture of the twenty-first century.

Anti-ad practices

So far, we have discussed what consumers do with ads and products, but advertisements can be themselves directly the subject of resistant cultural practices. The public service ads that we discussed earlier are exemplary in their use of advertising’s dramatic text and image juxtapositions to emphatically present political and public service messages. The form of advertisements themselves has also been the focus of work by artists who are interested in critiquing commodity culture. Artist Hans Haacke has created a whole series of works that use the codes of advertising as forums for political critique. In 1978, he reworked a series of advertisements for Leyland Vehicles, which make Jaguars and Land Rovers, in which he incorporated information about the company’s practices in South Africa during Apartheid, and created new slogans for the company, such as “a breed apart” and “nothing can stop us now,” in order to comment on its elitism. Haacke has consistently produced works that address the workers who are rendered invisible by the process of commodity fetishism, and the costs to these workers of their labor. In a 1979 image pictured on the next page, Haacke used the famous Breck shampoo campaign of the 1970s that featured the motif of a well-coiffed “Breck girl” to make a political critique of Breck’s labor practices. The text refers specifically to the fact that American Cyanamid, Breck’s parent company, gave women workers of child-bearing age whose jobs posed reproductive health risks the

AMERICAN
CYANAMID



AMERICAN CYANAMID is the parent of
BRECK™ Inc. producer of the shampoo which
keeps the Breck Girl's hair clean, shining
and beautiful.

AMERICAN CYANAMID does more for women
than soap. "We really don't touch a Breck's spot."
And therefore those of its female employees
of child bearing age who are exposed to toxic

substances are now given a choice.

They can be reassigned to a possibly lower
paying job within the company. They can
leave if there is no opening. Or they can have
themselves sterilized and stay in their
old job.

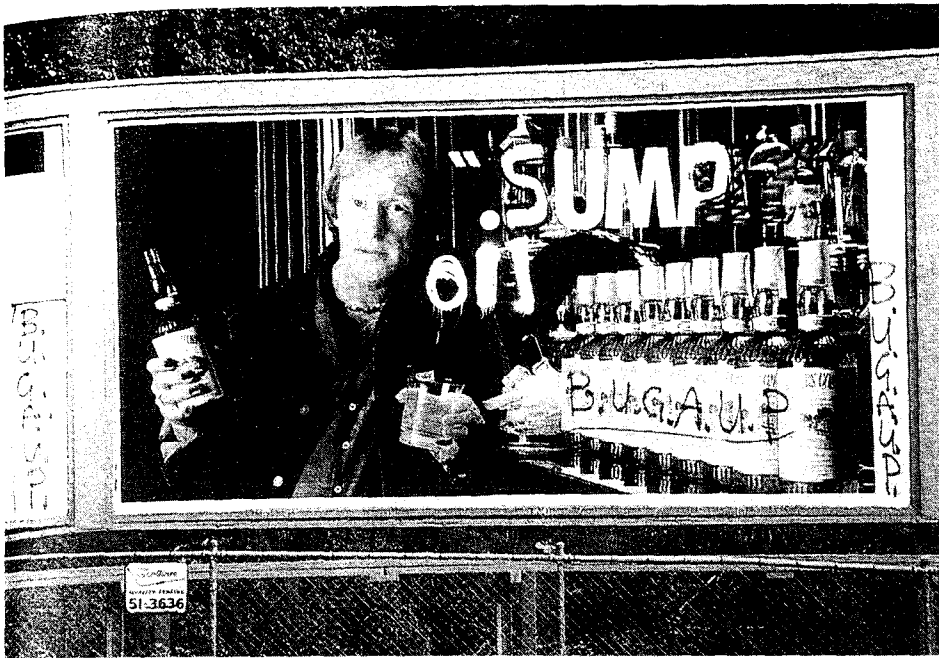
Four West Virginia women chose sterilization.
AMERICAN CYANAMID...

Where Women have a Choice

Hans Haacke, *The Right to Life*,
1979

“choice” of losing their jobs, transferring, or being sterilized. Haacke’s “ad” is thus not only a parody of Breck’s campaign, it is a political statement about the treatment of workers and the kinds of oppressive practices that corporations are allowed to use against workers. The image is thus explicitly about the absence of the female Breck worker in the original Breck ad, and her differences from the idealized Breck girl. As such, it offers a biting commentary on the way in which advertising sells a superficial concept of choice.

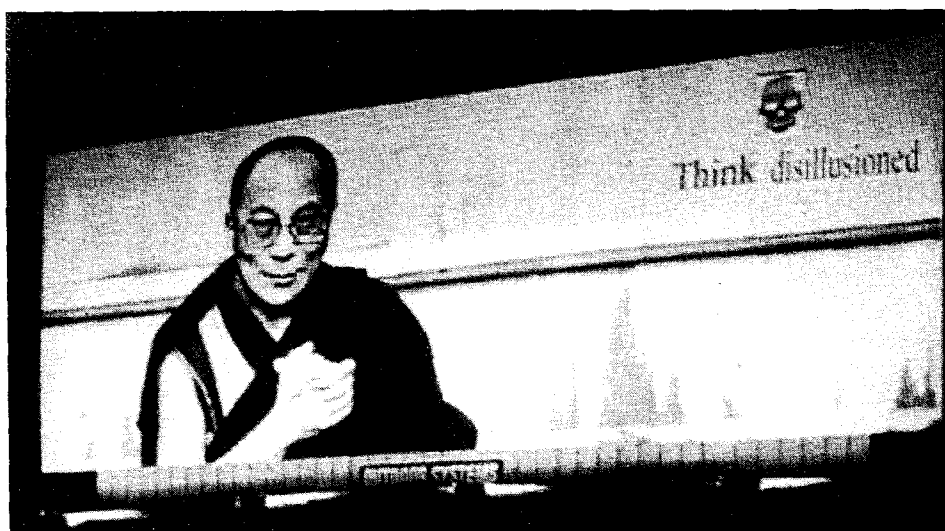
Advertisements are not only the subject of artistic parody, they can also be the site of on-site political messages. For instance, in Australia in the mid-1970s, a movement took place in which a series of billboards were “re-written” or vandalized by activists wielding spraypaint who were offended by the advertising messages and wanted to change them. Members of the group, and many others, signed their work “BUGA UP,” an acronym for Billboard Utilizing Graffitiists Against Unhealthy Promotions, which is pronounced “bugger up,” meaning to screw up. They achieved, for a period of time, popularity for their work in changing the messages of ads. BUGA UP would change slogans such as this one, from Southern Comfort to Sump Oil, “Marlboro” to “its a bore” and “Eyewitness News. Always First” to “We are witless nits: always are.” Others were explicit critiques of advertising’s underlying



BUGA UP billboard



Two billboards by the
Billboard Liberation
Front (BLF)



messages, such as a billboard of two hands grasping a beer can that was labeled “masturbation fantasy #133.” For the time period in which they were on display, these billboards were anti-ads and political statements about commodity culture, as well as other issues.

Since the late 1970s, a group in San Francisco, called the Billboard Liberation Front, has also been reworking billboards against their intended messages. The group redesigns billboards so that it is not readily obvious that they have been tampered with. For instance, the early cigarette ad, on the previous page, was changed to state “I’m real sick. I only smoke FACTS.” The BLF states that the group is not anti-billboard (in fact, several of its members work in the advertising industry); it believes that billboards should be available to all. They state, “to Advertise is to Exist. To Exist is to Advertise. Our ultimate goal is nothing short of a personal and singular Billboard for each citizen.”⁶ The BLF continues their work at a time when advertisers are increasingly attempting to coopt styles of anti-corporate messages. For example, the group reworked the Apple Computer “Think Different” slogan which is itself intended to get viewers to stop and attempt to identify the person in the image, by rewriting it as “Think Doomed” and “Think Disillusioned.” BLF also reworked a Levi’s Jeans billboard to include mass murderer Charles Manson as its spokesperson, and rewrote a Kent cigarette ad to read “Kant—The Choice is Heteronomy.” The work by groups such as BUGA UP and BLF has been defined by cultural critics as “culture jamming,” a term that refers to the CB radio terms for jamming someone’s broadcast and which was coined by the band Negativland.⁷ Writer C. Carr notes that these guerrilla artists are working out of the tradition of the Situationists of the 1960s, which we mentioned in Chapter 5, and its analysis of the role of spectacle in producing a banal experience of “pseudo-life.” The interventions of billboard artists, whether shock or humor is their strategy, thus changes the messages of the marketplace, startling viewers into thinking about those messages differently. It is the case, though, that advertisers are also using these self-mocking techniques to get attention, and thus the distinction between ads and anti-ads is increasingly difficult to make.

These processes testify to the complex ways in which processes of hegemony and counter-hegemony function in a continuous dynamic. Cultures are always in flux and are being constantly reinvented; they are always the site of struggles for meaning. In the culture of late capitalism, when the meanings of coolness and hipness are understood to be central to the exchange of commodities, there is a continuous appropriation of the styles of marginal cultures,

which are in turn in a constant state of reinvention. And, in the cultural realms of art, politics, and everyday consumer life, mainstream values are constantly questioned and political struggles are waged. As subversions and resistances at the cultural margins are appropriated into the mainstream, new forms of cultural innovation and refusal are found. Thus, in late capitalism, the boundary between the mainstream and the margins is always in the process of being renegotiated.

Notes

1. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York and London: Penguin, 1972), 131.
2. Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1993).
3. Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
4. Rosemary Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Property* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).
5. Coombe, *The Cultural Life of Intellectual Property*, 3.
6. Jack Napier and John Thomas, <<http://www.billboardliberation.com/home.html>>.
7. C. Carr, "Guerrilla Artists Celebrate 20 Years of Culture Jamming: Wheat Pasting against the Machine," *Village Voice* (28 April–4 May 1999) <<http://www.villagevoice.com/columns/9917/carr.shtml>>.

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